

Imperial Morocco

Separated from Spain by the Straits of Gibraltar and sandwiched between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, lies Morocco on the northern shores of Africa. Discover the rich history and culture of the Imperial Cities and the Great South. This tour will capture the dramatic contrasts of the kingdom. Breathtaking scenery and abundant imprints left by ancient civilizations offer a fascinating outlook at the uniqueness of Morocco.

May 06 & 07 USA to Morocco, Casablanca to Rabat (53 mi)

Depart the US on a night flight arriving in Morocco the following day. We will be met at Casablanca Mohamed V airport and transferred to join the group for a sightseeing tour of Casablanca, the economic capital of Morocco. This will include an exterior visit of the Hassan II Great Mosque, one of the Islamic world's greatest monuments. Tour proceeds through the Place Mohammed V, the United Nations Square, and the surroundings of the Royal Palace. We continue on to Rabat. Here we visit the superb Kasbah des Oudayas, the Mohammed V Mausoleum, the exterior of the Royal Palace and the huge Hassan minaret. In the afternoon, we check-in at our Rabat hotel, for dinner and overnight. (D)

May 08 Rabat to Volubilis and Meknes (125 mi)

After breakfast, depart for Meknes with a stop at the extensive Roman ruins of Volubilis and the sacred town of Moulay Idriss I, where the founder of Islam in Morocco is buried. Independent lunch. Continue to Meknes or " the Moroccan Versailles " which was founded at the end of the 17th Century by Moulay Ismail. Check-in at the Hotel Transatlantique or similar. Dinner and overnight stay. (B,D)

May 09 Meknes to Fez (37 mi)

Enjoy a morning tour of Meknes. Some of the highlights will include Bab Mansour, Hari Souani, Bou Inania Merdersa and the Musée Dar Jamaï. After a short drive, we arrive at Fez. Independent lunch. Check-in to the Riad Fes Guest House or similar. Afternoon tour highlights will include a visit to the "Arabian House" to observe various craftsmen performing their work reminiscent of ancient practices. A visit to Aux Merveilles du Tapis will provide a thorough introduction to Moroccan tapestry and carpet making in the spectacularly restored 14th century palace. Return to the guest house for our overnight. (B)

May 10 Fez

The day will be devoted to the sightseeing of Fez, the oldest cultural and spiritual imperial city of Morocco, which was founded in 790 B.C by Moulay Idriss II. Highlights will include the Medieval Medina, the Medersas (an Islamic teaching university), the El Qaraouiyyin Mosque and the sumptuous Nejjarine fountain. Short visits will be made to the Henna bazaar and the Terasse du tanneurs to observe leather tanners at work. Independent lunch and time to explore the many souks Fez is famous for. Overnight at the guest house. (B)

May 11 Fez to Midelt, Erfoud and Merzouga (275 mi)

After an early breakfast we will depart to Erfoud through the Middle Atlas region. Stop in Azrou to visit a Berber village known for its handicraft cooperative. Drive through fertile valleys and into the cedar forests and beautiful lakes of the Middle Atlas Mountains. Stop for lunch (not provided) at the nature reserve of Midelt before reaching the first slopes of the High Atlas. After Tizi Ntarghempt (6040 ft) begin the descent into the impressive palm groves and fortified villages of the Ziz valley and Erfoud. At Erfoud visit the quarry where blocs of fossilized fish plants and many other old sea minerals are taken to a factory to be cut into slices from which many objects are produced. A 40-minute drive via the extraordinary Tafilalt palm groves brings us to the Merzouga dunes at the northern edge of the Sahara. Meet the camels for a short ride to the dunes to watch a sun set. Enjoy a taste of Berber life and spend the night in a private tent at the Dunes of Erg Chebbi, the largest sand dunes in Morocco. Our tents have adjacent toilet and shower facilities. (B,D)

May 12 Merzouga to Todra Gorge and Dadès Gorge (83 mi)

After breakfast, travel via Tinejdad to the lovely village of Tinerhir, gateway to the Todra Gorges with their impressive escarpments. Later we will explore, via road and on foot, the equally impressive Dadès Gorge. Lunch on own. Of course, there will be stops to visit traditional Berber villages and encampments. Later in the afternoon we will make a stop at the nearby Glaoui Kasbah. Overnight at the Kasbah Ksar Kaissar or similar. (B)

May 13 Dadès Valley to Ouarzazate (50 mi)

After breakfast, we continue to Ouarzazate via El Kella M'Gouna and the Dades Valley. Along the southern flank of the High Atlas Mountains, our drive takes us on through this rather harsh valley, hemmed in by the High Atlas and Anti Atlas Mountains, dotted with decorated kasbahs of the local Berber people. The desolation of the scenery makes the lushness of the oases of Tinerhir and Skoura even more astounding, when they appear. The "sleepy" village of Skoura is said to have the most beautiful Kasbahs in Morocco, many still inhabited. Independent lunch. We will also visit the famed Taourirt Kasbah, just before reaching Ouarzazate for overnight at the Berbere Palace or similar. (B)

May 14 Ouarzazate / Villages/ Ouarzazate

After breakfast, depart on an excursion to the northwest, visiting Tifoultout Kasbah, the postcard-perfect Aït Ben Haddou village and the ruins of the ancient Aït Ben Haddou Kasbah. As long as there's no film in progress, we will visit the famed Atlas Studios where dozen of classic films have been shot, including Lawrence of Arabia and Sheltering Sky. Return to Ouarzazate after independent lunch and afternoon at leisure. Dinner and overnight at the hotel where we will enjoy a folkloric performance. (B,D)

May 15 Ouarzazate to Taroudannt (180 mi)

Our journey continues toward Taroudannt through the Souss Valley. The area is rich in agriculture, producing oranges, bananas, tomatoes and other crops. We arrive in this

picturesque town in time for lunch (not provided). As the capital of the Souss Valley, Taroudannt has traditionally been an important staging post in the Trans-Sahara caravan routes. The old city is surrounded by nearly 3 miles of rich red-ochre walls. The walls, considered by many to be the best-preserved in Morocco, give the town an elegant feeling. The town is famous for its two suoks: the Souk Arabe Artisinal and the Marché Berbère. The former specializes in handicrafts and jewelry; the later is famous for housewares, spices, wooden objects and furniture. Overnight in Taroudannt at Palais Salaam or similar. (B)

May 16 Taroudannt to Agadir and Essaouira (160 mi)

This morning we travel toward the Atlantic coast and make a short stop in Agadir, an important fishing and commercial port, famous for its seafood. From here we travel northward to the fortified, whitewashed fishing village of Essaouira. Once a pirate community, the town is located on a rocky promontory overlooking the some times raging Atlantic Ocean. There was a small Phoenician settlement at Essaouira, previously called Mogador. The Romans were interested in the purple dye produced from shellfish, which they used to color the robes of the rich. Mogador was occupied by the Portuguese in the 15th century, who built the fortifications around the harbor. Before dinner we may want to stroll along the extensive beach or visit the colorful fish market. Overnight in Essaouira at the Ocean Vagabond or similar. (B)

May 17 Essaouira

Once a Portuguese annex, Essaouira is one of Morocco's most charming towns with impressive ramparts that still give the city a fortified look. Free day to explore the port area for an interesting look into the fishery industry of Morocco, and the jewelry souk offering quality silver items. Essaouira is most famous, for its wooden handicrafts such as wooden boxes, chess sets and statues found in almost every shop. Visit the art galleries or the Musée Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdallah featuring excellent displays of marquetry and handicrafts. Explore the Marché d'Épices (spice market) where one can purchase cooking spices or some "cures for what ails you." Boat excursions are also available. Hotel overnight.(B)

May 18 Essaouira to Marrakech (110 mi)

Marrakech is one of the world's most enchanting cities that lures visitors with its unique character and charm, hospitable climate and superb location. As we draw near, we notice the many pink stucco buildings amid this tree-filled city. Situated in a lush palmerie, it dates to the Almoravid dynasty circa 1670. Founded by Youssef bin Tachfine, it became the dominant center of Morocco. Check in to Les Borjs de La Kasbah or similar, lunch on own. Free time to visit one of the many gardens, the Majorelle is recommended. Later, we will attend the Diffa Fantasia dinner under caidal tents at the famed "Chez Ali " restaurant. Enjoy the spectacle that includes camel and horse shows, folkloric troops from different Moroccan regions and belly dancers along with a typical Moroccan feast. Overnight at the hotel. (B,D).

May 19 Marrakech

Our morning tour takes us to the Koutoubia, 230 feet high and emulating classic Moroccan design. We will also take a short walk through the Mellah, or Jewish quarter en route to the Museum of Moroccan Arts. The museum houses an extensive collection of Berber jewelry, weapons, wood carvings, wedding ornaments and carpets. We then proceed to the Palais el Bahia where our guided tour takes us to several grand halls, gardens and the harem quarter. We culminate our tour with a visit to the Saadian Tombs, where we see the graves of the regime that made this city so important. Lunch on own. In the late afternoon, we will take an excursion by calèche, or horse-drawn carriage, through the streets of the new and old cities. Our destination for this evening is the famous Djemma el-Fna in the center of the city. The Djemma el-Fna is like nowhere else in North Africa. This "Assembly of the Dead," offers a spectacle that is a must-see when visiting Morocco. In the busy square you will witness a carnival of musicians, snake charmers, acrobats, story-tellers, witch doctors, dentists, clowns, monkey's and the like. The enduring smells of the Djemma's food stalls, piled high with platters of specialty cuisine, are well worth a visit just for the experience. After ample time exploring the Djemma's sights and sounds, we will return to our hotel by calèche. Overnight in Marrakech. (B).

May 20 Marrakech to Casablanca (150 mi) and onward to the US Transfer to Mohammed V airport in Casablanca in time for return flight to US arriving same day or extend your stay in Marrakesh. (B)

Marrakech Extension

May 20 Imlil and the Ourika Valley

Depart after breakfast for a full day tour of Imlil and the Ourika Valley. Stop and have lunch at La Kasbah du Toubkal. The Kasbah is perched on a great rock outcrop above the main village with panoramic views of the mountains, valleys and waterfalls. It is reached by a short donkey ride from the village of Imlil or a 15-minute walk. Return to Marrakech for overnight at hotel. (B,L)

May 21 Marrakech

Free day to relax or explore the city on own. Hotel overnight. (B)

May 22 Depart

Transfer to the airport for your flight to the US arriving same day. (B)